

Witchcraft Laws and Trials: A Brief Timeline

c. 700 BC

Exodus 22:18 Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.

Leviticus 20:27 A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them.

Deuteronomy 18:10 There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch. 11 Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer.

1487

The *Malleus Maleficarum*, (Latin for *Hammer of the Witches*, or *Der Hexenhammer* in German) written by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, Inquisitors of the Catholic Church, was first published in Germany. Witch trials began throughout Europe following the publication of this book and lasted until the early 1700s. An estimated 40,000 to 100,000 people—75 percent to 80 percent of them female—were executed during that period for witchcraft.

1542

The Witchcraft Act of 1542 (33 Hen. VIII c. 8) is the first to define Witchcraft as a felony in England. The Act provided that “the offender and offenders contrarie to this acte, being therof unlawfullie convicte befor suche as shal have power and auctorie to here and determyn felonyes, shalle have and suffre such paynes of deathe losse and forfaytures of their lands tentes goodes and catalles as in cases of felonie by the course of the common laws of this realme, and also shalle lose p’vilege of clergie and sayntuarie.” The Act was repealed in 1547 by Edward VI.

1562

The Witchcraft Act of 1563, officially “An Act Against Conjurations, Inchantments And Witchcraftes” (5 Eliz. I c. 16), provided that “that na maner of person nor persounis, of quhatsumever estate, degre or condition may be of, tak upon hand in ony tymes heirafter, to use ony mener of witchcraftis,

sorsorie or necromancie, nor gif thamselvis furth to have ony craft or knowlege thairof.” The Act instituted the death penalty only where the accused caused actual harm through the use of witchcraft.

1604

The Witchcraft Act of 1604, officially “An Act against Conjuracion, Witchcraft and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits” (2 Ja. I c. 12), expanded the Act of 1562 to bring the penalty of death without benefit of clergy to anyone who invoked evil spirits or communed with familiar spirits. The Act remained in force until 1735.

1626

Midwife Joan Wright of Jamestown, Virginia was the first person in the American colonies known to have been arraigned for being a witch. The record is unclear as to whether she was found guilty of practicing witchcraft. Fifteen individuals—13 of them women—were ultimately tried for witchcraft in Virginia; most were found not guilty.

1635

The Maryland Assembly adopted the English Witchcraft Act of 1604. South Carolina adopted the Statute in 1712, followed by Delaware in 1719.

1638

A complaint was filed against midwife Jane Hawkins of Boston, Massachusetts accusing her of witchcraft.

1641

The General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony adopted the following statute: “If any man or woman be a WITCH, that is, hath or consulteth with a familiar spirit, they shall be put to death. Exod. 22. 18. Levit. 20. 27. Deut. 18. 10. 11.”

1642

The Colony of Connecticut enacted the following capital law: “If any man or woman be a witch—that is, hath or consulteth with a familiar spirit—they shall be put to death.” Exodus xxii, 18; Leviticus xx, 27; Deuteronomy xviii, 10, 11.”

1647

Else Young of Windsor, Connecticut is the first person known to have been executed for witchcraft in the American colonies. She was hung in Hartford, Connecticut on May 26th. The specific charges against her are not known, nor are the details of her trial. The following year Mary Johnson of Wethersfield, Connecticut was probably executed in Hartford after a forced confession.

The Assembly of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations adopted the following statute: "Witchcraft is forbidden by this present Assembly to be used in this colony; and the penalty imposed by the authority that we are subjected to is felony of death. 1 Jac. 12." It appears that no one was ever prosecuted under this statute.

1648

Margaret Jones of Charleston, Massachusetts, a healer and herbalist, was the first woman executed by hanging for practicing witchcraft in Boston. Her husband was also arrested but was later released.

1651

John and Joan Carrington of Wethersfield, Connecticut, husband and wife, were indicted for witchcraft on February 20th, and found guilty on March 6th. They were most likely executed by hanging. They were the first couple executed for witchcraft in the American colonies. Between 1647 and 1697 approximately 42 individuals were accused of witchcraft in Connecticut, several of them multiple times. At least ten were executed.

1654

Katherine Grady, an elderly woman bound for Jamestown, Virginia on an English ship, was hung by the ship's captain during a storm after having been identified as being a witch.

A second elderly woman, Mary Lee, was hung the same year on a ship bound for St. Mary's City, Maryland. She was accused by the crew of using witchcraft to cause a storm that threatened to sink the ship.

1656

The General Court of the New Haven adopted the following statute: "If any person be a witch, he or she shall be put to death according to Exodus XXII, 18; Leviticus XX, 27; Deuteronomy XVIII, 10. 11."

Eunice Cole of Hampton, which was then part of Massachusetts but which is now in New Hampshire, was convicted of witchcraft. She was sentenced to be whipped and was sent to a Boston prison on a life sentence. Around 1660 she was released from prison to care for her ailing husband, however she was soon returned to jail. Released again following the death of her husband, she was again charged with witchcraft and returned to prison. She was released again sometime between 1668 and 1671. Cole died in 1680. In 1938, the residents of Hampton voted to restore her to full citizenship.

1658

Elizabeth Garlick of East Hampton, New York, was brought before local authorities on suspicion of witchcraft. Sent to Connecticut for trial as the local magistrates were not “skilled in the Science of Demonology,” she was acquitted on May 5th.

1659

Elizabeth Richardson was hung by the captain of a ship bound for Maryland. It was claimed that she had caused a storm using witchcraft.

1660

Mary Wright of Oyster Bay, New York, was arrested on suspicion of witchcraft. Sent to Massachusetts for trial—Oyster Bay was culturally attached to New England—she was acquitted of being a witch but convicted of being a Quaker and banished from the colony.

1663

Mary Barnes of Farmington, Connecticut, was tried and hanged for witchcraft. She was the last person executed for witchcraft in Connecticut.

1665

Ralph and Mary Hall of Brookhaven, New York, husband and wife, were tried upon suspicion of witchcraft. The parties were acquitted. Five years later, in 1870, Katharine Harrison of Westchester, who had been banished from Connecticut after being found guilty of being a witch, was arrested by New York authorities upon suspicion of witchcraft. She was released by the New York Court of Assizes “with liberty to remain in the towne of Westchester where she now resides, or anywhere else in the Government during her pleasure.”

1671

The General Court of the Plymouth Colony adopts the following statute: "If any Christian (so called) be a witch, this is, hath, or consulteth with a familiar spirit; he or they shall be put to death."

1679

The General Assembly of the Province of New Hampshire adopts the following statute: "If any Christian, soe called, be a witch, y't is, hath or consulted w'th a familiar spirit, he or they shall be put to death." No one is ever executed for witchcraft under the law.

1683

Margaret Mattson was tried for witchcraft in Pennsylvania, the only recorded trial for witchcraft in the Province. She was found guilty "of having the Common Forme of a Witch, but not Guilty In manner and Forme as Shee stands Endicted" and sentenced to six months good behavior. According to tradition, William Penn asked her "Hast thou ridden through the air on a broomstick?" After the confused defendant replied "yes," Penn reportedly said that there was nothing in the laws of Pennsylvania that made riding a broomstick a crime.

1685

Rebecca Fowler was hanged on October 9th in Calvert County, Maryland after a jury found her guilty of "evil and diabolical arts called witchcrafts, enchantments, charms and sorceries." She was the only person known to have been executed for witchcraft in Maryland, although according to legend a second woman, Moll Dyer, froze to death in 1697 after witch hunters forced out of her Leonardtown, Maryland home on a winter night.

1692

The most famous witchcraft trials in American history began in Salem, Massachusetts in February 1692 and May 1693. Almost 200 individuals were accused of being witches, of whom 19 were hung, one was pressed to death and others died in prison. In 1697 the General Court of Massachusetts ordered a day of fasting for the tragedy. One of the leading accusers, Ann Putnam, offered a public apology in 1706. In 1711, the colony passed a bill restoring the rights and good names of those accused and paying restitution to their heirs. In 1957 the State of Massachusetts formally apologized for the events of 1692.

1697

Winifred Benham of Wallingford, Connecticut was acquitted on charges of witchcraft. It was the last recorded witchcraft trial in Connecticut.

1706

Grace Sherwood of Princess Anne County, Virginia was tried and convicted of witchcraft. Sherwood was twice examined by a jury of women for “witch’s marks, both juries reaching a positive verdict. On July 10th she underwent trial by water, being thrown into Chesapeake Bay at a place now known as Witchduck Point. Sherwood swam, an indication that she was guilty of being a witch (drowning would have cleared her of the charge). The matter may have then been dropped by the authorities—the records are unclear as to whether she served jail time. She died in 1740 leaving a sizable estate. On July 10, 2006, Sherwood was officially pardoned by Virginia Governor Tim Kaine.

1712

A jury acquitted Virtue Violl of Talbot County, Maryland, of using witchcraft to harm the health of a neighbor. It was Maryland’s last known witchcraft trial.

1718

The Pennsylvania General Assembly adopted “An Act for the Advancement of Justice” which brought the English Witchcraft Act of 1604 “in execution in this province.” There is no record of any trial for witchcraft in Pennsylvania under this statute.

1730

The October 22nd issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, edited by Benjamin Franklin, reported on a witch trial at Mount Holly, New Jersey. A man and woman were reportedly charged with “making their neighbor’s sheep dance in an uncommon manner, and with causing hogs to speak, and sing Psalms.” At the time the article was accepted by many as being accurate; Dr. Franklin apparently had a good laugh at the hoax.

Compiled by Mark W. Podvia